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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6613

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9287

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5142

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1254

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2534

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER TH

SUBJECT: THE SOUTHERN BORDER PROVINCES ADMINISTRATION

CENTER: REFORM AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH

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Classified By: Political Counselor George Kent, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary and comment: In an early December meeting, Vithit Powattanasuk, an MFA officer assigned to the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center (SBPAC) in Yala province, told us that the SBPAC was responsible for directing and monitoring all efforts in the deep south that could be construed as "peace building" or development. He said it was primarily concerned with long term efforts to end the insurgency through educational reform, economic development, and the promotion of justice. The MFA worked with the SBPAC to control the involvement of foreign stakeholders in the south, determine which ones could assist the Thai government in ending the conflict, and facilitate their involvement in SBPAC approved projects. The SBPAC was particularly interested in promoting Malaysian cooperation and involvement in educational and religious reform efforts, and in revitalizing efforts with the Dubai World to invest in major development projects in the south.

¶2. (C) Comment: Although Vithit's comments appeared to come from approved talking points, our conversation did provide interesting insight into the workings of the SBPAC. SBPAC is responsible for monitoring and directing all peace building and development activity in the South, but apparently has little control over the activities of other government ministries and agencies. While we agree with Vithit that some venues of private Islamic education in southern Thailand have played a role in feeding the insurgency, his condemnation of pondoks may be too sweeping. Although the Thai government needs to have some counter-radicalization strategy, government led efforts to "reform" Islam in the past have only exacerbated the violence. SBPAC willingness to consult with Malaysia regarding these reform efforts is welcome. Vithit's final remarks on the justice sector came only after repeated prompting. It was a topic he did not plan on addressing. We have heard little from other contacts in the South about SBPAC efforts in this area, and remain deeply skeptical it has any real influence to address flaws in the justice system. End Summary and Comment.

MFA, SBPAC, and the South

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¶ 13. (SBU) On December 7, we met with Vithit Powattanasuk, an MFA liaison officer to the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center (SBPAC). According to Vithit, his job extended beyond serving as an MFA liaison to the SBPAC; it involved operationalizing national level MFA policy initiatives at the local level in southern Thailand. He said the MFA's foremost concern in the South was to ensure that the insurgency remained a domestic issue. To that end, all offers of assistance to the South by foreign governments and international organizations were vetted against SBPAC's priorities and strategy for ending the violence. He explained that the process was likely too slow for many potential donors, but it was necessary to ensure the Thai government remained in control of the situation. Within this context, he said, his responsibilities involved working with international stakeholders to provide assistance in southern Thailand at the local level. Using Malaysia as an example, he said the Malaysian Government sponsored over 20 events in southern Thailand last year. He said Malaysia is key player in the southern conflict, and he needs to ensure local authorities understand the importance of that relationship.

¶ 14. (SBU) Vithit told us that day-to-day security affairs were left up to the security forces and the 4th Army Area through the Joint Civilian-Police-Military (CPM) command. SBPAC was primarily concerned with a long-term strategy to end the unrest by developing a tolerant and pluralistic society in the South. He said the SBPAC operated on an annual budget of 30 million baht (approximately \$857,000 USD) and was responsible for directing and monitoring all efforts in the conflict zone that could be construed as "peace building" or development. This included the administration of justice, the protection of human rights, and coordinating

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the work of all Thai agencies engaged in southern Thailand. Showing us a wire diagram, he said the SBPAC reported directly to the 4th Army Area Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), on equal footing as the CPM. The SBPAC coordinates laterally with the CPM, all ministries, departments and agencies that have a presence in the South, and an organization called the Advisory Council for Peace Building in the Southern Provinces.

#### Education and Religion

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¶ 15. (SBU) Moving through what seemed to be prepared talking points, Vithit said the SBPAC's first priority was reforming the system of education in southern Thailand, including religious education. Focusing on the role of religion in the conflict, he said the pondok system of religious education (private Islamic schools) had to be changed because it led to radicalization and fed the violence. He said the SPBAC was looking to Malaysia for guidance on this, and in particular was focused on Malaysian assistance on ways to promote Hadari Islam. (Note: Hadari Islam is a form of Islam promoted by Malaysian Prime Minister Badawi that emphasizes tolerance, moderation and a more open attitude towards modernity. According to press sources, it is questionable whether Badawi has had any real success in promoting his version of Islam. End note.) Vithit said he thinks it will take at least a generation to fully reform this system.

#### It Might be the Economy

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¶ 16. (SBU) The SBPAC's next priority, according to Vithit, was economic development. He said poverty was not as severe in the extreme south as in other parts of Thailand, but his assessment was that it was a contributing factor in the violence. He said there are currently some 200,000 Muslims from the South who work in Malaysia, many illegally, and send back remittances of approximately 400 million baht annually. (Note: Vithit emphasized these were not official figures. He

said his source was a consultant hired by the SBPAC to look at economic development in the South. End note.) He explained that the political situation in Malaysia was such that he was concerned Malaysia would expel all the illegal Thai workers, cutting down the remittances and pushing the South further into poverty; fewer remittances coupled with falling rubber prices would be disastrous for the region.

17. (SBU) The SPBAC solution, according to Vithit, was to continue to advocate for the Exclusive Development Zone (EDZ) in the extreme south, a concept that was approved by the Thai cabinet in 2006, and a reexamination of the feasibility of a large infrastructure project. Unfortunately, he told us, there was no clear budget plan to develop the EDZ, and the SBPAC did not have the authority to either budget money for it, or compel other ministries to develop it. As for the infrastructure project, he said the SBPAC was interested in revitalizing plans to construct a "land bridge" bisecting the South in order to connect the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. The land bridge would involve the construction of deep water sea ports on both coasts, and rail and road infrastructure connecting them. Although a memorandum of understanding was signed with Dubai World to conduct a feasibility study for this project several months ago, Dubai World had suspended its involvement in the project with the advent of the global economic crisis. He said the political situation in Bangkok also precluded any serious discussion of moving the project forward any time soon (note: this Kra Isthmus canal project idea has bounced around as a concept since the 1970s, would have massive environmental implications, and is unlikely ever to get beyond a feasibility study).

Promotion of Justice

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18. (SBU) Vithit also commented briefly on justice sector issues. He said SPBAC officials were well aware of the

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allegations made by NGOs and foreign observers that security forces acted with impunity in the South and that there was no transparency in court proceedings in southern Thailand. According to Vithit, army and police in the South feel they have been unfairly maligned by misinformation spread by these groups. While being careful not to comment on the allegations themselves, Vithit said a bureau had been established within the SBPAC called the Justice Bureau which was charged with ensuring due process and transparency in legal proceedings. He said this bureau was staffed with 50 officers from the Ministry of Justice and Department of Special Investigation. In addition, each district in southern Thailand has a bureau representative to ensure fair treatment under the law. He said that if a local citizen feels wronged by a ministry official or any of the security forces, they should first go to the police. If, for any reason, the police cannot or will not help, they can approach the Justice Bureau representative. In addition, he said, this bureau advises the courts in term of transparency. While the court system is under no obligation to pay attention to the Justice Bureau, the bureau tries to work with them to ensure proceeding happen swiftly and transparently.

JOHN